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The definition of social work is still up for grabs

Social work has changed over the years, but it is still by no means set in a single mould, argues Vivienne Cree

Vivienne Cree

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Social work was outlawed for many years in China during and after the Cultural Revolution. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

I first asked the question "what exactly is social work?" in my PhD studies. I was working at the time as a social worker in a voluntary sector [children and families'](#) agency in Edinburgh.

Looking for an envelope one day in a dusty cupboard, I found some old case-record books that revealed the agency had formerly been called the National Vigilance Association (Eastern Division). It was part of a world-wide movement whose objective was to "save women and girls from the perils and evils of the white slave trade".

This discovery took me on a journey into social work history, where I learned that from its early days, social work really was "up for grabs". There was no template as to what it was, and what it should be, so the "social work" practised by this agency was no more or less social work than that practised by all the other agencies operating at that time (children's charities, friendly visiting associations, university settlements, housing associations, factory inspection agencies, poor law institutions etc).

It was clear to me that all those involved in social work (managers of services, practitioners, committee members, unpaid volunteers, service users, educators and students on the early social studies and social

administration courses) had a part to play in building the knowledge, values and skills that were central to social work.

This wasn't simply a UK enterprise, either. Social work managers, educators and practitioners travelled across the world, meeting at conferences in Europe, in the United States and in what became the British Commonwealth, visiting projects to share good practice and building their profession along the way.

Social work today is a global profession, practised in most countries in the world – including China, where it was outlawed for many years during and after the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s.

But what is social work today? The kind of social work that is practised in the UK is very different to that in other parts of the world; local authority social work may seem to have little in common with either the therapeutic models common in the US or the social welfare approaches in the developing world.

And yet we are all social workers: we share a value-base and we have all signed up to an [international definition of social work](#) that states, "The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work" (IFSW/IASSW, agreed 2001).

The international definition of social work sometimes feels like a big ask. How are we, as individual social workers, to fulfil these aspirations, when we are faced with the day-to-day, grim realities of people's lives? And what does this definition have to say about social work today, as it is practised in its very different contexts across the world?

Maybe that's what is so important about believing that social work is still "up for grabs". Social work has changed, but it is by no means set in a single mould. We are all, individually and collectively, involved in a project that is about creating a better society and a better world. To do this, we must "own" our power and our responsibility for making social work as good as it can be, now and in the future.

Vivienne Cree is professor of social work studies at the University of Edinburgh. Her most recent book, [Becoming a Social Worker, Global Narratives](#) (2013), is published by Routledge.